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ON PAGE 4A

WORLD

Gorbachev probes Siberian oil production problems

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MOSCOW — Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev flew to Western Siberia yesterday to investigate serious production difficulties in the country's main oil fields.

His trip came as the Soviet Union, the world's largest oil producer, is slashing crude oil exports to the West because of extraction problems.

Western industry analysts have estimated that the Soviets may have to cut up to one third of the exports, but Finland's state-owned oil company reported it had been told the decrease would be somewhat lower.

About 60 percent of Soviet hard currency earnings come from crude oil sales to the West. Thus, any decline in exports is likely to create a chain reaction that may affect this country's purchasing power overseas as well as its domestic growth rate.

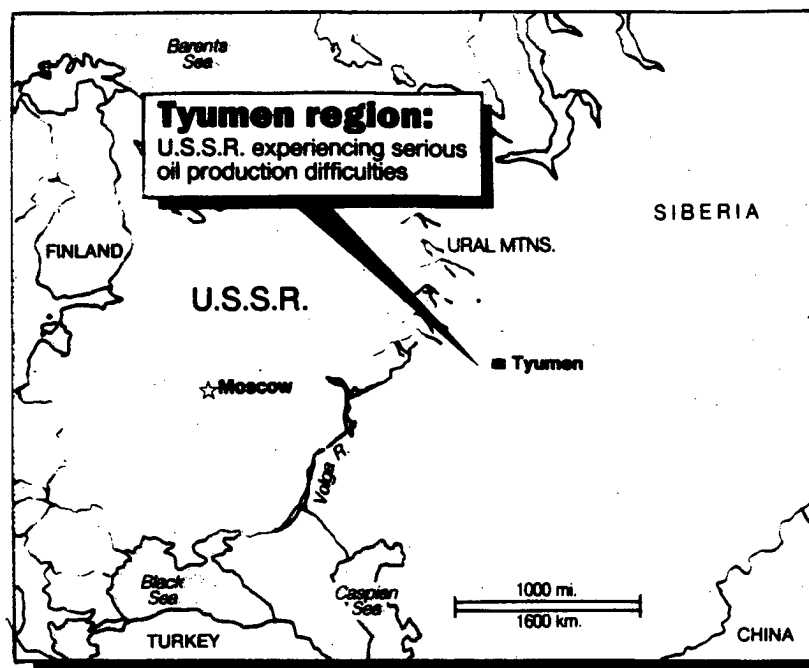
During his visit to the Tyumen region, which is experiencing particularly serious problems, Mr. Gorbachev exhorted workers in the city of Nizhnyvartovsk to boost their output.

The party leader, dressed in a wool overcoat and gray fedora, was shown on the national evening television news chatting with oil workers.

"We cannot live without Siberia now," Mr. Gorbachev told them. "Conquering Siberia is a matter concerning all of us. I will say this [at a forthcoming meeting], that it is necessary to say good things about the people who come here.

"But now you face new demands, new tasks, and Tyumen is lagging behind a little bit. This is impossible."

A Soviet economic newspaper reported recently that 20 percent of the wells in Tyumen were out of ser-



vice because of maintenance problems.

As Western Siberia experienced heavy development pressure to replace declining output elsewhere, twice as many wells were drilled to produce the same yield as five years ago.

Maintenance of the numerous wells has become a major problem because of transportation difficulties and because few skilled workers want to work in the inhospitable conditions of Siberia.

Western Siberia replaced the Volga-Urals area as the main center of Soviet oil production in the 1970s.

Initially, the new fields were more extensive and more productive than expected. But they seem to have been depleted sooner than anticipated as well.

Soviet oil production trouble was first predicted by the CIA in 1977 and has been evident for some time.

In February, the difficulties resulted in the firing of Soviet Oil Minister Nikolai Maltsev.

About the same time, Vladimir Dolgikh, the party secretary in charge of the energy industry, toured the troubled Tyumen fields.

He criticized work performance there, even though authorities over the past four years had resorted to wholesale firings of incompetent extraction managers and leaders of geological and construction teams.

Since Mr. Dolgikh's visit, dismissals of senior managers have continued.

According to a British government estimate, energy will absorb over one-fifth of this country's capital investment and almost half of its industrial investment for the rest of the century.

Those heavy investment needs come at a time when Mr. Gorbachev has ordered an economy-wide drive to intensify production and modernize outmoded plants.